

H.A. Hochbaum
Canvasback Artist/Duck Population
Interview: 1986

H.A. Hochbaum:

.....the whole summer right over here in the cabin, he and Florence. I got acquainted with them in New York City and said why don't you come up, and they said, "We have already decided to." And so they came on up and lived in a one room shack out in the marsh for all summer.

Interviewer #1:

And had a good time I'll bet.

H.A. Hochbaum:

We had a good time, don't think we didn't. They were just unbelievable. Did you know them?

Interviewer #1:

I never met them, I know people who knew them very well, they were just great people.

H.A. Hochbaum:

They were the salt of the earth.

Interviewer #1:

Yep.

H.A. Hochbaum:

He was very, he was the most even-tempered fellow you ever met, and he didn't talk very much, but whenever he said something, you know...

Interviewer #1:

It was time to listen.

H.A. Hochbaum:

It was time to listen, I'm not going to forget, and he and she were there. He did some articles on the (unclear) and for the beaver magazine and for two of the books they did, Canadian Spring and North of The Yukon.

Interviewer #1:

Great scratchboard artist.

H.A. Hochbaum:

Pardon?

Interviewer #1:

He was a great scratchboard artist.

Interviewer #2:

He was a great artist in all cases.

H.A. Hochbaum:

And you know, you and I and everybody else tried to do scratchboard after we thought and you couldn't do it unless it looked like what he was doing, isn't that right?

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, because he did it the way it is supposed to be done. I tried that for awhile, that's terrible stuff, I gave up on it.

H.A. Hochbaum:

Not all of it was scratchboard, he did, I don't think all of the pictures in the geese...

Interviewer #1:

Geese fly south?

H.A. Hochbaum:

Geese fly art. I don't think all of them were scratchboard.

Interviewer #2:

They may not have been.

H.A. Hochbaum:

I've got five of his....

Interviewer #1:

Do you really. The only thing I wish about it, I wish he would have done more water...

H.A. Hochbaum:

More easel paintings, most of his career was either, it was black and whites for Florence's book or the...

Interviewer #2:

Dioramas.

H.A. Hochbaum:

Dioramas, which he did beautifully. His oils, to be perfectly frank, are stiff.

Interviewer #2:

Yes.

H.A. Hochbaum:

We stopped off at Churchill before getting a plane to the north.

Interviewer #2:

On the train, did you take the train?

H.A. Hochbaum:

We flew up. I always wanted to take the train.

Interviewer #2:

I told these guys on the way up, I said I want to take that train ride; it's a long train a ride.

H.A. Hochbaum:

Yeah, I still want to take it. Still, seeing the Arctic from Churchill is like seeing the Rocky Mountains from North Platte. So, we flew up to Churchill and then we ran into bad weather, we weathered in there, waiting around, and I'd always wondered what the train was like, the train was coming in and so I came in at 8 o'clock in the morning and I went over to see it come in. Standing there, watching the engine come in pull up to the stop. The first two people off the train were Florence and Lee Jeffries! They didn't see me, you see, so I ran around and went into the waiting room the back way and I just stood there, and they came in and said, "Well Al, what are you doing here?" I said, "Al who?" We didn't last long, but we had a magnificent reunion, you know. He collects train rides, he collected train rides all over the world, and they were collecting this ride to Churchill, and they came up on the train, and it gets in at 8 o'clock in the morning and leaves, I don't know, in the late afternoon. So, we had the whole day with them there.

Interviewer #2:

That is about an 18 hour train ride, I think, too.

H.A. Hochbaum:

I think it is probably more than that.

Interviewer #2:

Probably more, it could be more than that, yeah, it only goes like 35 miles an hour. The rails get too wide if they go any faster than that, they can't nail the rails down.

Interviewer #3:

He had a fascination with trains didn't he?

H.A. Hochbaum:

Pardon?

Interviewer #3:

He had a fascination with trains?

H.A. Hochbaum:

He had a great model railroad in his home, which is now...

Interviewer #2:

It's in Duluth isn't it?

H.A. Hochbaum:

It's in Duluth, yeah.

Interviewer #3:

At the Depot?

Interviewer #2:

A museum up there of some kind. He is... complimented him on his birthday, and he said, "Thank God I never have to paint another one of those damn birds again!" He was evidently tired of them!

H.A. Hochbaum:

Well, he had to paint identification pictures.

Interviewer #2:
Yeah.

Interviewer #3:
For museums.

Interviewer #2:
And that's deadly stuff.

H.A. Hochbaum:
I mean, you got a loose pair of canvasback there right? He had to paint....

Interviewer #3:
Feather for feather.

H.A. Hochbaum:
Pardon? Yeah, feather for feather.

Interviewer #2:
That's deadly work, that's no fun at all. I don't know about you but...

Interviewer #2:
When did you come up here?

H.A. Hochbaum:
Uh, June 9, 1938.

Interviewer #2:
Was the station operating at that time?

H.A. Hochbaum:
Well I'll tell you, the hatchery was here. Mr. Bell from Minneapolis had this shooting lodge and property here on the marsh, and one day somebody in the local paper wrote a note about how all these bloody Americans are coming up here and shooting all the ducks, and he said, "I'm going to put two ducks back in the marsh for everyone I shoot." So, he built a duck hatchery and he raised canvasback, redhead, mallard, and pintail. He did put back more than two ducks for everyone they shot. What they did, ducks re-nest, what he did was go out and have the men go out and take eggs from the first nest and add some hair, then mother would re-nest. So, for every mother there were two clutches, and they would raise them and banded them and released them. I was doing a master's degree at University of Wisconsin, and I heard about this, a hatchery at the edge of a wild duck marsh, an unbelievable situation, so I came up to do my master's degree and I haven't gone back.

Interviewer #1:
Where are you originally from?

H.A. Hochbaum:
I'm Colorado, Washington D.C., Ithaca, New York, and I went to Cornell and University of Wisconsin.

Interviewer #2:
What part of Colorado?

H.A. Hochbaum:
Greeley.

Interviewer #2:
I lived in Boulder.

H.A. Hochbaum:
When I was in school in the 1930's, early 30's, from the campus you could see the flocks of canvasback and redheads on Lake Cuyahoga.

Interviewer #3:
You wrote about it in your book.

H.A. Hochbaum:
Yeah, and you could tell the difference because the redhead flocks were tight and the canvasbacks flocks were loose.

Interviewer #3:
You wrote a book about, something about, "Have you heard the bells on Lake Cuyahoga?" and that's where it's from, you went to school there.

Interviewer #2:
Do you stay here year round?

H.A. Hochbaum:
Pardon? And watch them come back, it was exciting, you know, you stand here and watch them come back, and say, "There's a first flock of (____), look there.... but no more.

Interviewer #1:
What's the difference between now and then?

H.A. Hochbaum:
No ducks.

Interviewer #1:
Is it total lack of ducks?

H.A. Hochbaum:
Not a total, you've seen the two ducks around here.

Interviewer #2:
We see a few.

Interviewer #1:
A lot of snow and blues today.

Interviewer #3:
How much of a difference though?

H.A. Hochbaum:
Oh, night after night standing here watching the ducks come back and go onto the north, yeah.

Interviewer #2:
A steady stream?

H.A. Hochbaum:
Pardon?

Interviewer #2:
A steady stream?

H.A. Hochbaum:
Correct. And then in the fall, up and through the 50's, the early 50's, up until 1958, from early August until the end of October we had anywhere from 200,000 to 400,000 mallards. After 1960, the total population of ducks in the marsh didn't top 25,000. So, we have gone from 200,000-400,000, almost half a million, down to 20,000....

Interviewer #3:
Do you see a lot more geese here now then compared to 30-40 years ago?

Interviewer #2:
Let's not get into geese.....

H.A. Hochbaum:
And the thing is, those mallards roosted on the lake shore and sat in the stubble fields, the Lake Shore is the same, just as good as ever for roosting, and the stubble fields are better than they were then, so it isn't a habitat thing. The geese, they march to a different drummer, the young go with their parents, and the parents teach the young.

Interviewer #1:
What were canvasback numbers like in '38 compared to right now? The first survey in '52 or '54 whenever it was, but how noticeable a difference is it for the canvasback?

H.A. Hochbaum:
Let's put it this way, I wrote a book on the canvasback here in the late '30's and early '40's, there aren't enough canvasback left to study.

Interviewer #1:
Compared to...?

H.A. Hochbaum:
You can study a couple of pairs, yeah. Understand what that they are doing with the population.

Key Words: H. A. Hochbaum decoy carvings, Florence and Lee Jeffries, Dioramas, canvasback artist, Churchill, model trains, Duluth, canvasback identification pictures for museums, James F. Bell, duck population, mallards, canvasback, redheads.